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Gingrich, Talking Up a Storm

Professor Gingrich, erstwhile instructor in history and now tutor to millions, has been caught recently in various factual boo-boos. It turns out that some of the facts he cites to support his political agenda are, in fact, not facts at all, and some of his anecdotes simply didn't happen the way he said. In less than a decade, we've gone from Ronald Reagan's index cards to Gingrich's laptop, but the results somehow are the same.

Gingrich is possessed of an auctioneer's tongue. He talks fast and thinks fast, although at times he seems to have a coordination problem. Whatever he says, though, is usually eminently quotable, which is why when Gingrich speaks much of Washington listens—and the GOP freshman class in Congress swoons in admiration. They should all wear bobby socks.

To list Gingrich's misstatements, exaggerations and downright screwball utterances would take the rest of this column. The other day, for instance, he said that many newspaper editorial boards contained "socialists"—a statement so preposterous, I can only assume he meant "socialites."

Statements like these serve a purpose. Recently, for instance, Gingrich said that public housing was the creation of Lyndon Johnson and his Great Society. Not true. Corrected, he later said that even if public housing predated LBJ by many years, it was still a mess and that there were projects "where nobody goes out to work." Nobody? Nobody believes that.

Similar examples abound. Gingrich recently mentioned a "federal" shelter in Denver that operates so inefficiently it costs a bundle to keep it going. No such institution exists. He has talked about the 10-year-old St. Louis public school student who was suspended for saying grace in the cafeteria. Not so, says the superintendent of schools. The kid was disciplined for another reason. As for a heart pump Gingrich says the Food and Drug Administration would not approve, that's true only because the device was never submitted for approval.

In some respects, Gingrich is the mirror image of the person he most abhors: the 1960s radicals. They were monster exaggerators. The system needed to be trashed, not reformed. The United States had not simply meandered into a bad war in Vietnam but was inherently evil. Capitalism did not merely have its excesses but was vile, corrupting and exploitive. Revolution—not reform—was what was needed. One does not renovate a rotten structure; one pulls it down.

Gingrich also fashions himself a revolutionary and as such engages in his own version of '60s-era rhetoric. He tends to portray the system (liberalism) as terminally corrupt. It has to be junked, initially removed from Washington and ultimately from the country itself. He turns problems into crises to justify his program, which is as radical as any proposed in the 1960s.

Ronald Reagan did something similar. He, too, was a font of misinformation and anecdotes designed to show how bad things had gotten. He was animated by a loathing for modernity and a yearning to return to yesteryear. But Reagan was also immensely likable and nonthreatening. In fact, his two terms have come and gone, and it's hard to say where exactly he was successful in turning the clock back.

Gingrich, though, is hardly perceived as avuncular. For all his futuristic talk, he shares with Reagan a loathing for what has become of Betty Crocker's America. He wants to close with modernity—which he calls liberalism—and snap its neck. That's why he and like-minded Republicans overshoot reform and go too far. Tort reform is overdue, but not the imposition of the British system in which the loser pays. Welfare reform is a good idea, and immoral and self-destructive behavior ought to be punished—at least not subsidized. But kids should not have to suffer for the stupidity of their parents.

For some reason, even the school lunch program has to take some hits. Why? Because it is yet another example of Big Government spoiling the little guy with unearned goodies. But the lunch program is not just welfare on a steam table but a response to the demands of the contemporary American economy. With real income sagging, mothers are not about to go back into the home, whipping up the ol' pancakes in the morning and packing a lunch for junior. The school does what mom used to—or had to—and nothing Washington can do is going to change that.

By such overreaching, such high-C rhetoric, Gingrich and his band of demolition experts are in danger of squandering the mandate they had to reform—not trash—government in Washington.

Little by little it will become clear that while Gingrich talks like a futurist, his heart is in the past. He is a sentimentalist with the same enemy as Reagan had: the world as it is.